

# Racism and bullying in rural primary schools: protecting white identities post- Macpherson

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# **Racism and Bullying in Rural Primary Schools: protecting White identities post-**

**Macpherson**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines how two primary schools in rural England with overwhelmingly White populations (of students and teachers) dealt with incidents of racist bullying in relation to their race equality policies. The data is drawn from in-depth interviews with parents, head teachers and teachers. The paper draws on the work of Foucault to argue that students are situated in a 'historical moment' in which schools acknowledge racism formally and publicly, but this does not reflect their informal, private practices. Consequently, whilst systems are established that could respond to racist bullying, in practice these do not necessarily emerge in the school. A local discourse emerges that counters suggestions of racism by pointing to the existence of anti-racist systems and describing racism as something distanced geographically and historically from rural settings. White identities are both privileged and protected by this process whilst non-white students are disadvantaged.

**Keywords: Equality Act, Foucault, Historical Moment, Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, Racism, Rural Schools**

## Introduction

Research in the UK has examined how discourses of racism are understood differently within predominantly White rural populations (Chakraborti and Garland, 2004; Neal, 2002).

Chakraborti and Garland (2004) describe different forms of racism in the countryside, ranging from ‘low level’ harassment such as name-calling and staring, to graffiti, physical attack, damage to property and petrol bombing. In 1993 the murder of a Black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, in south-east London resulted in a public enquiry (Macpherson, 1999) which concluded that the Metropolitan Police, who were responsible for the murder investigation, were ‘institutionally racist’. The publication of *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report* (Macpherson, 1999) increased awareness of the effects of racism and the need for institutions to implement policies that counter racism.

This paper examines how policy implementation post-Macpherson reflects historical and geographical contexts; specifically the spaces of mainly White schools in rural locations. It considers Flyvberg’s assertion that democratic processes and civil society are often undermined by power relations in which,

People know how to be, at the same time, tribal and democratic, dissidents and patriots, experts at judging how far a democratic constitution can be bent and used in non-democratic ways for personal and group advantage (1998, 217).

This Foucauldian contextualisation of power relations and identity politics highlights the potential for interest groups within pluralist societies to promote their own singular values. This article considers English rural schools characterised by overwhelmingly white populations of staff and students.

The persistent resonance of ‘Englishness’ in terms of idyllic, pastoral landscapes is often dissonant with the lived experience of the countryside. Williams (1985) underlines this in his account of seventeenth and eighteenth century poetry in which the pastoral idyll represents the viewpoint of outsiders rather than rural inhabitants. Ironically this resonance strengthens throughout the nineteenth century despite greater industrialisation and migration into cities (Lucas, 1990). Today similar picturesque visions persist; *The Daily Telegraph* (26 March 2013) ran a feature around picture postcard villages under the by-line, ‘*Rural Idylls Where Time Could Have Stayed Still*’, tellingly echoing Williams, it appeared in the paper’s *Expat* section. The romanticisation of rural life glosses over or ignores problems of insularity, isolation, poverty, low literacy rates and hostility to ‘outsiders’ (Misch, 2009).

Schools are often places where people from different backgrounds find themselves in close contact. Rural schools open up a ‘space’ in which the countryside and notions of Englishness unusually come into contact with discourses of identity for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups. This research demonstrates an entrenched discourse of White culture unhappy to acknowledge racism flourishes in such spaces. Whilst acknowledging societal problems of ‘racism’ such discourses deny its existence in local, rural contexts. This article explores how rural primary schools with overwhelmingly White majority populations understand and deal with incidents of racist bullying. It examines how schools address bullying in line with race equality policies including the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act* 2000 and *Equality Act* 2010. Using in-depth interviews and case studies it details the experiences of BME families who raised concerns or made complaints about racism and bullying in schools.

## **Racism in schools**

Racism amongst children in primary and secondary schools is well-documented (Carroll, 2002; Connolly, 2002; Gillborn, 2005) including work sponsored by the DfES (Cline *et al*, 2002; DfES, 2004). The *Race Relations (Amendment) Act* 2000 required schools to record racist incidents and the numbers of these incidents have been reported widely (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2011; BBC, 2012). Hart (2009) contextualises this as the emergence of a liberal ‘anti-racist industry’, causing school time to be wasted collating over-inflated statistics. However, evidence tends to suggest under-reporting of racist incidents is more likely (DfES, 2004).

Research suggests consistent racial conflict takes place through name calling and physical fighting towards BME groups (Varma-Joshi *et al*, 2004), Gypsies (Cemlyn *et al*, 2009), and, newer migrant groups (Rutter, 2003; Tomlinson, 2005). Crozier and Davis (2008) describe racist harassment and insensitivity to cultural differences by White students, with little evidence of diversity being embraced in schools,

Ethnocentrism together with racist harassment serves to relegate the young people to the margins, where they have little choice to remain, not least for fear of their safety (2008, 298).

The school curriculum should positively reflect religious, ethnic and cultural diversity as part of the student experience (Ajebo, 2000) and be conscious of plurality in British society (Parekh, 2000). However, many schools fail to recognise the value and diversity of students

through the curriculum (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000); often because teachers lack confidence teaching students from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Gaine, 2005; Tikly *et al*, 2004).

The DfES (2004) identified three kinds of ‘mainly White schools’ in which less than 6% of students were from BME backgrounds: neighbourhoods within multi-ethnic cities where primary schools are mainly White, but not necessarily secondary schools; commuter belts close to multi-ethnic cities; and, almost totally White areas, (urban, suburban or rural), with fewer than 2% of residents are from BME backgrounds. These schools were characterised by a lack of awareness of racism in the school and locality; of insufficient awareness amongst staff of principles of good practice for preparing students for a culturally and ethnically diverse society; and, of preferring to treat all children equally and play down issues of ethnic and cultural difference (Cline *et al*, 2000).

Connolly (2002) highlights the widely held view that BME people ‘do not belong’ and ‘should go back to where they came from’ and notes that racist name calling amongst White children is often part of a male-subculture. In mainly White schools name calling in the playground, school corridors and locality is the most common form of abuse experienced by BME students (Cline *et al* 2002). Carroll (2004) suggests students experience racism daily and need to develop appropriate coping mechanisms. Teachers however, often describe feeling ill-equipped to deal with issues of racism and diversity which are not adequately covered during initial teacher training or in-service training (author ref 2009).

The ascendancy of White identities, Whiteness and White privilege often take shape as an invisible, unchallenged norm (Dyer, 1988; Frankenberg, 1993), that reinforces institutional hierarchies based on a system of White supremacy (Gillborn, 2005; Leonardo, 2002). Gillborn (2005) and Jensen (2005) have explored the impact of Whiteness on educational policy making and how policies minimise the impact of racism and work as a form of White supremacy. Whiteness has been used to examine how teachers understand their own racial identities and how the ideology of these identities materialise in classroom teaching (Picower, 2009). Critical Race Theory (CRT) has identified systems of Whiteness as a form of privilege and hegemonic dominance in education (Gillborn and Ladson-Bilings, 2009; Leonardo, 2004). CRT has been used to analyse the operation of racism at structural levels including the use of counter-storytelling, acknowledging Whiteness as a form of property and the nature of interest-convergence (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). This article argues that the structures, ideologies and stereotypes of Whiteness operate in schools to reinforce institutional hierarchies and systems of Whiteness.

## **Legislation and Policy**

**Colebatch (2006) describes policy-making and enactment as extending beyond traditional perceptions of identifying and solving problems into the more ambiguous arena of social construction and discourse. Maguire *et al* (2014) describe policy enactment as ‘a process of social, cultural and emotional construction and interpretation’ (2014:2), in which policy makers and policy actors are shaped by, and in turn themselves shape, wider prevalent discourses. Against this backdrop two specific documents framed debates about policy during the research.**

*The Equality Act 2010* replaced previous equality legislation including the Race Relations Act, Disability Discrimination Act and Sex Discrimination Act, providing a single, consolidated source of discrimination law. It simplified the law by removing anomalies in existing legislation and extending protections from discrimination. It legislates that schools cannot discriminate against students because of their sex, race, disability, religion or belief and sexual orientation; with protection extended to students who are pregnant or undergoing gender reassignment. Schools were required to publish equality information and objectives and meet targets to alleviate disadvantages experienced by students with protected characteristics (OFSTED, 2011).

*The Schools White Paper* (2010) placed a duty on schools to promote community cohesion regulated by OFSTED<sup>1</sup> inspections. The proposed OFSTED framework for 2012 outlines four core areas for schools: student achievement; quality of teaching; quality of leadership and management; and students' behaviour and safety. OFSTED are required to consider students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Schools should demonstrate how their community links contribute to students' development and meet the needs of all students in terms of gender, ethnicity and special education needs.

## **Methodology**

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<sup>1</sup> The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) inspect and regulate services which care for children and young people, reporting direct to Parliament.



The research was conducted in two primary schools in rural England with overwhelmingly White populations. We obtained access through the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS), who previously commissioned research to examine the educational experiences of Gypsy children (author refs) including their experiences of racism. Conducting that research raised a number of unanswered questions about the experiences of other non-White, minority groups in rural schools. We interviewed 17 BME parents about their children's experiences of schooling and how schools and teachers dealt with incidents of racism and bullying. In addition we interviewed the head and deputy head from both schools, eight teachers and six teaching assistants. These interviews focussed on how schools dealt with complaints and incidents of bullying in relation to local and national policy making. We wanted to accumulate data that represented a holistic view of the school to use as case studies.

Being introduced by the EMTAS ensured the research was regarded credibly by schools and underlined its relationship to issues of inclusion and social justice. Given the sensitivity of the research, respondents were informed they could withdraw at any time and assured of anonymity and confidentiality in the dissemination process.

Our methodological focus was based on an interpretive approach which enabled respondents to share their personal histories and lived experiences. Interviews and documents were analysed using methods of grounded theory and discourse analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Fairclough, 2001). We were particularly interested in analysing themes which corresponded to our research questions in both the interview data and documentary evidence. These included parents' experiences in relation to school policies on anti-bullying, anti-racism and behaviour

codes. We analysed schools' race equality and bullying policies and the extent to which they implemented the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act* (2000) and *Equality Act* (2010) by exploring specific themes in relation to specific definitions of bullying and behaviour as well as how incidents were dealt with.

## **The Schools**

Despite being geographically close the school's student intake differed significantly:

### *Southside School*

Southside school was described by OFSTED as 'outstanding',

It provides an excellent education for pupils and prepares them very effectively for the next stage of their education. Achievement is outstanding and pupils in Year 6 are on course to exceed the very challenging targets set for them in the national tests. Underpinning this excellent progress is high quality teaching linked to a curriculum which meets the needs of all pupils very effectively.

The report also states,

The school makes an effective contribution to promoting community cohesion and this is evident in the way in which pupils work and play very well together whilst accepting each other's differences.

Southside was a 'mainly White school'; less than 3% of the 203 students on roll came from non-White families; there were 2 Black African Caribbean, 1 White/Thai, 2 Black/White and 1 White/Asian student. All the teaching and administrative staff were White and predominantly middle class. The majority of parents whose children attended Southside were from

middle class, affluent backgrounds. This reflected its immediate locality in a small, somewhat isolated village with few pockets of social housing and little new build housing. The village maintains a 'picture postcard' appeal, reflected in inflated house prices comparable to neighbouring villages. There was a widely held perception that Southside village and school served a narrow cohort of generally more middle class families.

### *Highgate School*

Highgate village school was also a 'mainly White school' with 3.4% of its students from non-White backgrounds. Of the 298 students on roll 3 were from Black African Caribbean backgrounds, 3 were Black/White, 3 were Asian and 2 were Asian/White. The teachers were predominantly White, with 1 Asian and 1 mixed race teacher. Teaching and administrative staff were from a mixture of middle and working class backgrounds. The school had a more mixed intake in terms of class reflecting a less affluent and exclusive locality than Southside. Highgate included several older estates of social housing and newer, privately owned, housing estates. Whilst retaining the nomenclature of 'village' Highgate had seen considerable development in the past 15 years of affordable housing estates and did not resemble a 'picture postcard'. The school was graded 'good' by OFSTED,

Parents and carers particularly value the outstanding level of care, guidance and support provided for their children. Questionnaires confirm parents' very positive views of the school. As one parent said, 'Our child's experience is rich, varied, fulfilling and fun ... and the school's very inclusive approach promotes awareness, understanding and respect of others.'

### **Racism and bullying**

All parents said their children experienced racism; generally as name-calling but in some cases physical harm. Some parents described this as 'racist bullying' characterised by being consistent, on-going, derogatory and directly related to ethnicity. Racist name-calling referred to student's skin colour and/or country of origin. All parents noted they would raise concerns about racism with class teachers or the head teacher. Parents also confirmed their children reported racist behaviour to their teachers. All teachers and both Heads explained explicitly they would not tolerate racism or bullying. The process for dealing with such incidents was led by the head teacher and senior management team, with individual teachers having little control over how they were dealt with.

Mrs Freeman had been the head teacher at Southside for over 10 years, she was passionate about her school, admitting to being a 'control freak' who wanted complete control over all aspects of the school. All the BME children at Southside experienced racism according to their parents and these incidents were brought to the attention of the school. However Mrs Freeman suggested such incidents had nothing to do with 'race'.

I don't think you can actually say that it was racism; it was just the children - they pick on differences and so they picked on the fact that [name of child] is not White like the other children in this school are. You are taking it out of context to say that it is racism. It's like saying that someone is fat or has ginger hair so they are picked on. When the children say 'brown boy', they're not actually being racist are they? Because we don't have racism in our school. We are an outstanding school.

When asked about specific incidents, she was adamant they were dealt with appropriately.

We did what we always do in these situations, we made sure that both the children were spoken to when the incidents happened and both were told that such behaviour is wrong and not tolerated here.

The head described speaking to ‘both’ or ‘all’ of the children on several occasions, suggesting these incidents were regarded in a context of shared responsibility. Amira described a relatively serious incident when her son was called racist names, chased and punched by a group of boys. Afterwards, her son and the other boys were brought together to discuss the incident. The Head and another senior staff member explained to *all* the boys that it was wrong to call *each other* names and to fight. Finally all the boys were told to shake hands. Amira felt all the boys, including her son, were effectively reprimanded for communal behaviour rather than distinguishing between *bullying* and *being bullied*. Despite evidence of racist name-calling and school and County policies highlighting the significance of racism, the incident was interpreted in terms of generalised rowdy behaviour.

When Amira complained to Mrs Freeman about this apparent parity in treatment, she felt her family were not seen as victims but as the ‘trouble-makers’,

On the face of it, when I went to meet the Head, she was very sympathetic. She asked about our family. How the children were. But she just kept repeating this line that she wouldn’t tolerate any trouble or any aggression in the school. She said all the boys have to learn that. And she was speaking to all the parents to explain that. And she expected all the parents to make their children behave. I asked her if she was saying we should discipline [son’s name] and she said it again. All the parents. All the children. I said but he’s being bullied. He’s covered in bruises. And she said the same thing again the school need all the parents to support it and ensure all the children behave.

Talking to Mrs Freeman she stressed she did not want her school’s reputation to be tarnished,

We work very hard in this school to keep its reputation, we are an outstanding school and we work hard to maintain that. We want to make sure we keep that and so we do what we have to do and deal with things so that they don’t happen again. The children and the parents know what we do and we do it well and they know once something is dealt with, it is finished and we move on.

She suggested there was a 'political' problem when parents complained about issues like racism which could jeopardise the school's reputation and adversely affect all students. She maintained that complaints were dealt with effectively and monitored by the school governors.

Mrs James, the Head of Highgate, appeared to approach complaints, particularly about incidents of racism and bullying differently. She also had been in post for 10 years, was highly respected and a well-liked head teacher. Her school had a larger intake of statemented children with special educational needs and was a well-established centre of excellence for providing specialist facilities for children with physical disabilities. The school's attitude towards 'difference' was one of overt inclusion; this was particularly noticeable in the day-to-day arrangements to include wheelchair bound students in all activities. This contrasted in some respects to Southside where statemented students occasionally appeared confined within a small, discrete annex to the main building. When asked about racism and bullying, Mrs James acknowledged they occurred in her school.

Yes we have had incidents of racism and bullying in our school and we try to deal with them effectively. We are a school which has a large diverse intake. We have many parents who live in social housing and on income support and at the other end of the spectrum we have affluent, middle class parents. So the school is very mixed, but we still have our problems. I feel sad when I hear that bullying or racism has gone on in the school but we have to deal with it. We speak to the parents immediately and bring them in and the children and make them confront it. We are not afraid to say it is bullying or racism - if that is what it is – because then you can deal with it. I always tell my parents not to go home if they are worried about something, they must always tell us. If they don't tell us we can't sort it out for them.

When asked about a specific incident that was reported to us by one of the parents, she noted,

Yes it was an incident of racism and we tried to deal with it effectively. We were actually very strict with the boy [who had been racist] and his parents. Consequently, both children are here and have to get on as they are in the same class. If [non-White parent] had taken her child out of school that would make me feel like I had failed. Failed her and the whole school, because as a head teacher I have to make sure that these issues are dealt with because if they are not, then I am complicit in allowing them to happen.

Mrs James was very open about the incidents in her school and was clear they should be dealt with immediately so that 'normal' school life could continue,

As a head teacher you have to be fair and you have to be careful. But I don't think dealing with incidents of racism is different to dealing with incidents of other forms of bullying, because they are all serious and they are wrong. They have to be dealt with immediately and stamped on and the whole school – the children and their parents have to be clear that we do not ever tolerate such behaviour – regardless of who the parents are.

We also spoke to teachers at both schools. Mrs Hadley, a year 5 teacher at Southside contextualised pupils using racist language as generic bad behaviour,

We have had a couple of incidents in the school, but they are not necessarily racism. I think sometimes the parents overreact and think that it's racism and then become obsessed with that – when actually it is just bad behaviour. Then what happens with it, is the incident just blows out of proportion and we are at the mercy of the parents.

When pressed about such incidents she described situations in which it was not immediately apparent the school were at 'the mercy of the parents'. Instead she described an occasion when she felt parents exaggerated their account of racist bullying. The consequence of this incident was that the parents moved their children to another school. Although Mrs Hadley acknowledged this must have been a difficult decision for them, she went on to describe how,

Parents are quick to complain now because they know they can and when they complain we have to act on it. They kind of know their rights. But I think they are not always right and don't need to always complain. They also know that if they say it's a complaint and then they put it in writing we have to deal it. They know they can complain and so they do it. But in some cases, those complaints are not founded on accuracy and could be for other reasons – such as being unhappy with the teachers, the school or even other children and their parents.

Parents who complained about racism and associated bullying were labelled as exaggerators and regarded suspiciously. Their behaviours were seen as a threat to the school's stability because it highlighted a link between the school population and racism. School staff failed to recognise racism as a threat to school stability and by doing so reinforced White privilege and the dominance of the majority White school population. Whiteness in the school space was effectively associated with acceptable norms of behaviour used to reinforce dominance and privilege (Picower, 2009).

Mr Dickinson, a year 5 teacher at Highgate, offered a different approach to complaints reflecting the school's more inclusive ethos,

I think you have to expect parents to make complaints because parents aren't always happy and sometimes we don't always get it right. When they do complain we take it seriously and deal with it the best way we can.

He explained that he expected parents to complain because the school was not always perfect and complaints were one way in which the school could look to make improvements. Mr Dickinson made a direct link between the need to understand parental concerns and then act upon them. In other words the school enacted its policies as a means of improving the school



whereas at Southside it often appeared policies were enacted in order to maintain the school's reputation.

## **Two Case Studies**

### *Southside primary school*

Jonathan and his sister Monica, from a Black African Caribbean family, moved from London to Southside 5 years previously when their father Daniel got a job as an accountant. Their mother Amira, a secondary school teacher, described their initial reception,

People would look at us as though they had never seen a black face before and when the children went to the school, people were not friendly to us. They didn't welcome us at all. In fact, they sort of avoided us, it took them a long time to realise we are not that different from them. I remember that there were only two maybe three families who were friendly to us then.

Amira had been cautious about moving outside of London but admitted to being seduced by images of the countryside as a close knit, friendly community;

It was going to be great – everyone would be friendly to you and be a real community, but it hasn't turned out like that at all, in fact people see us as trouble now and we are the outsiders and we will always be seen that way. That's because we are Black and we stand out and they don't know how to deal with us when they realise we are well spoken and have good jobs. That just goes against their stereotypes of Black people.

In year 1 Jonathon experienced persistent though low level, non-racist bullying. The family's relations with the school developed a distinct pattern; when bullying occurred both parents would visit the school to document their concerns with the Head. In the short term the bully-

ing stopped but inevitably at a later date it would recur. During year 5 the bullying took on an overtly racist tone,

Each time the boy would pick on Jonathan we would have to go to the school and when we went we were seen as troublemakers and always seen as complaining – as if we had nothing better to do – all we wanted was for our children to be safe and happy. When the boy started to call Jonathan ‘blackie’ and ‘brown boy’ we were very upset and Jonathan himself didn’t quite know how to cope with it.

When the parents went to the school to speak to the Head, she became defensive,

The head teacher didn’t know what to say, it was like she was in denial and couldn’t believe that boy had called Jonathan these names. I think she thought we were lying. Or that Jonathon was lying. And she said to us, ‘we don’t have racism or bullying in our school, and if the children do say those things, it’s not racist, it’s like saying you have ginger hair’. Well actually, we said to her it isn’t, it goes far deeper than that for us because we are Black, but she just didn’t want to listen.

The situation deteriorated and eventually Jonathan was physically harmed. This resulted in the family formally complaining in writing with evidence demonstrating their son had experienced persistent racist bullying.

We did make an official complaint to the school and the education authority. It was a matter of principle. It was awful what happened to Jonathan, but it could happen again to other Black children if they go to that school. We had to take Jonathan out of the school and that had an effect on him. It affected his confidence and it made him feel as though it was his fault, yet those boys who did that to him are still at that school and have not had their lives disrupted.

Amira described how the evidence they accumulated to demonstrate their son was being racially bullied were seen as exaggerations by the Head. More troublingly the weight of evidence they accumulated was used by the local education authority’s solicitor as evidence of such exaggeration. Amira received a letter from the County’s Chief solicitor suggesting their

continued pursuit and documentation of their concerns constituted bullying *by the family of* the school. Furthermore they could be barred from school premises and communicating directly with the school, (it was suggested that all future communications with the school would need to go through the County's solicitor). Reviewing their complaint the school governors noted their continued faith in the leadership of the Head evidenced by an 'outstanding' OFSTED report. The governor's also concluded the family were exaggerating as demonstrated by their excessive use of documentation, that Jonathan had not experienced racist bullying and that the school had acquitted itself well in dealing normal 'playground disputes'. Amira reflected,

We were the ones who were seen as the troublemakers because we dared to make the complaint and take it forward. So they thought we were just doing it because we wanted to cause trouble. Do you think we would do this just to cause trouble? We complained because we had no other choice and because it was the right thing to do.

Consequently Jonathan was enrolled into a private, fee-paying school. His sister still attends Southside school.

The school staff, governors and County solicitor all sought to blame the family for the consequences of the racism experienced by Jonathan. A process of White privilege materialised which reinforced and maintained the stability of White norms of behaviour.

*Highgate Primary school*

Dilip, his younger sister and family moved from Birmingham to Highgate when Dilip was in year 3. His parents, Seena a nurse and Harminder a doctor, both work in a local hospital.

When Dilip experienced racist name calling Seena spoke to his class teacher who told her,

They would not tolerate this behaviour and said immediately he would get back to me later on in the day. He called me and said he had spoken to the boy and also to his parents and the next day they were going to speak about treating others with respect in the assembly.

Seena was pleased with how the incident was dealt with but was more upset when it happened again and spoke to the head teacher,

She was very good and appeared to be a bit upset because she said she was proud that her school was inclusive and welcomed everyone. She said she would have to speak to the parents again and this time possibly say that if it happened again there would be serious consequences.

Seema and her husband did not put anything in writing, the only contact with the school was verbal and the head teacher acted immediately on the family's concerns. When we spoke to the head teacher she said,

When something happens in our school – and especially something as serious as racism – we act on it immediately and we deal with and stamp it out so that it doesn't happen again. School should be seen as a place of safety. And that is what me and my staff try to provide for *all* the children in our school (original emphasis).

Since this incident, Dilip and his family remain happy with the school and there have been no repeat incidents.

I guess that because it has happened once, the teachers are more aware of it and so I guess they probably keep an eye on it and make sure that it doesn't happen again. Not just to my children, but the other non-White children as well. They have to take it se-

riously and they do. That's why I think the school is able to do things well, like be properly inclusive with all the children.

Highgate appeared both to accept the truth of the family's concerns and respond to them quickly and directly. Seema noted she would have written to the school but felt that it was 'unnecessary' because of their quick response.

### **A 'historical moment'**

Being in the same County both schools shared similar or identical policies relating to complaints, race and equality issues and child safety. The wording of policy documents is important in defining the overall 'feel' and nuancing of County policies. We argue these are indicative of a 'historical moment' apparent within the County's attitudes towards schooling, parents and its positioning in relation to political and social trends. The County issues standard guidance to schools on monitoring, reporting and responding to racist incidents which unsurprisingly makes reference to *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report*. Indeed, every page of its guidance bore the following notation,

*A racist incident is defined as 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person' (Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, 1999).*

Whilst it could be the County's intention that everyone working within education fully understood the lessons of Macpherson, another reading was that the County was simply promoting a self-image of being closely associated with the post-Macpherson *status quo*. The mantra-like, repetition of the Macpherson definition of racism situated the County policy within a particular 'historical moment', one that acknowledges past failures to address racism and the

need for clearer definitions of what constitutes racism. However this public face did not accord with accounts of how racist incidents were being dealt with by Southside School. There was a discrepancy between published policy and its practical application.

One reason for this discrepancy was apparent in the contextualisation offered by the County's school complaints policy, which included a section headed *Why Do Parents Complain?*

Parents and carers may make complaints for a number of reasons, some of which may seem trivial but are important to the complainant. These reasons include:

- Greater government and media emphasis on education causing parents to be more questioning and schools and the Local Authority to be more accountable.
- A litigation conscious society in which there is an expectation that people will fight for their rights, as they perceive them.
- Misunderstandings by stressed and anxious parents.
- On-going personal feuds between children and families, which can lead to vexatious and frivolous complaints.

There is no suggestion complaints might be justified or result from problems at schools.

In conjunction County policies on racism and complaints guidance seemed destined to clash. At Southside complaints about racist incidents were trivialised within local discourses that failed to acknowledge racism and at a County level within discourses that labelled parental complaints as misguided or malicious. A 'historical moment' materialised in which the importance of Macpherson and the Stephen Lawrence murder were both privileged and negated. Schools positioned themselves to *appear* within post-Macpherson discourses whilst continu-

ing with practices identifiable pre-Macpherson. In this post-Macpherson moment old racist behaviours and the reinforcement of White privilege continued within the everyday working lives of schools. A smokescreen of post-Macpherson rhetoric was presented as the public mask of the County's education policies.

### **Subjects for a 'historical moment'**

In principle schools actively ignoring racism could be understood as a local failure to implement County policy. However the County appeared complicit in the school actions (e.g. through the work of their solicitor), suggesting behaviours understandable within a wider ethical framework. In Foucauldian terms a subject position in which particular White identities are constructed emerges from both the practical policies of the County, and, the school's ethical positioning which understands these policies need not be implemented. Historically this is specific to a post-Macpherson moment in which the need to engage with the troubling spectre of institutionalised racism and racial violence is identifiable but positioned geographically outside a White enclave that regards itself unaffected by such discourses. White identities emerge, those of teachers, students, parents, which have been 'inscribed' by the 'surface of events' (Foucault 1984, 83). Keith describes one consequence of pluralism within city governance, (and related to this emergent descriptions of 'stakeholder' democracy), has been to 'naturalise a false understanding of a clear-cut boundary between state and civil society' (2005, 46). In the rural context of 'mostly White schools' the demographics of a pluralist society belong to a world a considerable distance away. Locally 'mostly White' schools, 'mostly White' state bodies and 'mostly White' civil society merge together, seamlessly representative of a single discourse. In the case of Southside school, pluralism was limited in

terms of ethnicity and also its narrower cohort of middle-class, non-statemented pupils. The interests of Southside emerged as being very distant from the urban and suburban contexts of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. The school absorbed a message of distant and troubling racism but one reconstituted within the desire for a White, stable and untroubled school. Policy-making and enactment at County and local level worked to reinforce the interests of White stability above the interests of BME students.

Foucault (1988, 1991) suggests subject positions are produced as a result of prevalent discourses, a view that understands individual identity to be socially contextualised and reflect historical change. Such subject positions are the ‘targets and anchorage points for the ventures of knowledge’ (Foucault 1998, 105) and emerge within historically specific settings. McNay (1992) notes this reading of history challenges traditional thinking that seeks to establish a source or origin to a specific historical sequence. In doing so Foucault challenges ‘certain metaphysical concepts and totalising assumptions derived from a philosophy of the subject’ (McNay 1992, 13), instead of a history dominated by the self Foucault replaces a sense of identities personified in the body and the discourses of power that are inscribed upon the body. A historical understanding of the processes that regimes use to legitimate their power is uncovered. Foucault describes a discontinuous idea of history again through the locus of the body and the changes wrought upon it, at the centre of the struggle for domination, the body is shaped and reshaped by different warring forces acting upon it (McNay 1992, 15). The body is therefore not a recognisable avatar representing the self, but ‘the inscribed surface of events’ (Foucault 1984, 83); a scarred battleground on which history can be read.



School and education authority staff adopted processes and techniques for dealing with racism. Firstly they actively positioned accounts of their behaviours within an ethical framework working within equality policies responding to *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report*. Secondly despite such active positioning they worked to undermine the equal rights of pupils in schools. In a Foucauldian sense subjects emerge whose ethical practice is the step beyond acknowledging the legal and moral codes that provide a framework to their lives and represent instead the lived practices by which they understand themselves within these frameworks. Discussing how the body becomes the site for the construction and the deconstruction of events and ideas, McNay describes how this manufactures disrupted histories,

The aim of effective history is not to systematize but to disperse and fragment the past (1992, 15).

The repeated mantra of the Macpherson definition of racism was disrupted and undermined by the parallel vocalisation of misconceived parental complaints or points of comparison (such as ginger hair). In this history, schools presented an ethical account of their work in which concerns about racism could be comfortably side-lined.

Other forms of disruption were used to counter threats to the school's stability, in particular threats that challenged a *status quo* characterised by hegemonic Whiteness. Parents who challenged practices of White privilege were identified as the villains rather than the victims of racial hierarchies. Parents described how when they made complaints about the school in what they considered a straight-forward non-confrontational manner, their actions were re-constituted by the school and the County as aggressive or threatening. Parents described their

surprise when the County's Chief Solicitor wrote *accusing the parents of bullying the school* by persisting with a complaint. The County effectively realigned its ethical position; supporting the school over parents within discourses that acknowledged the realities and currency of bullying but transferred it as the crime of the parents acted upon the school as victim. The historical moment was further framed by a discourse in which 'a litigation conscious society' was in the ascendant; even if it was apparent parents had no intention and probably no actionable grounds with which to sue the Council and no evidence existed of this having occurred in the past. Racial hierarchies associated with a discredited past continue to be perpetuated in rural schools in a new historic moment that has reinterpreted the challenging or questioning of White privilege as a threat to school stability.

## **Conclusions**

This research is historically and geographically located; within insular White communities and within a time frame in which there is a sense that social equality and justice need to be the backbone of an ethical framework. Although the framework remains visibly in place, the ethical work within it disrupts its potentially positive effects. The unhealthy dominance of White privilege and White hegemonic institutions has produced a 'culture of complacency' in rural primary schools; race and racism are understood to be high on public and political agendas, but understood to be irrelevant to the actualities of rural life and schools. Race was no longer a 'problem' if it was covered by the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act* or the *Equality Act*. In small rural village schools what emerges is a post-Macpherson or post-racial moment. In some respects misplaced nostalgia for a rural idyll that never existed in the past re-materialises. In these discourses the terrible events of the Stephen Lawrence murder have

been addressed, as belonging to a different place and time; to a history that has been dispersed and reconfigured into playground scenes of ‘boys being boys’, of schools whose hands are tied by ‘political correctness’, of ‘litigious’ parents and of non-White faces disrupting the *status quo*. The figures that emerge in these discourses are recognisable in a stereotypical fashion that does not reflect the lives of BME families living in rural areas. In rural schools that address a more pluralistic range of students it is noticeable they have a greater understanding of the value of respecting difference amongst their students.

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